DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 260 FL 014 121

AUTHOR Brown, Cheryl
TITLE Requests for Specific Language Input: Differences between Older and Younger Adult Language Learners.
PUB DATE Oct 83
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the University of Michigan Conference on Applied Linguistics (10th, Ann Arbor, MI, October 28-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Adult Learning; Adult Students; *Age Differences; Curiosity; *Inquiry; Middle Aged Adults; Religious Cultural Groups; *Second Language Learning; Spanish; Student Interests; Student Motivation; Success; Vocabulary Development; Young Adults

ABSTRACT

A study of the kinds of requests for foreign language information made by adult students of Spanish, and a comparison of the kinds of inquiries made by students aged 19 to 23 and those over 55 years, are reported. The objective was to learn more about what language learning processes are contributing to the difference in success of the two groups. The subjects, part of a larger study, were training as missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The older missionaries, although highly motivated, have historically had more difficulty with language training. The students kept journals about their language learning, and their topics were analyzed according to the amount of requests for "input," or specific requests for more information. The results showed the younger students talked about input more than four times as much as the older students. Older adults' requests for changes in instructional elements accounted for over ten times as much journal content. Analysis of classroom inquiry showed the younger learners asked more about vocabulary and the older learners requested complete phrase repetition more often. It is suggested that: (1) older learners do not focus on input in language learning as much as younger learners do; (2) while younger learners are more concerned with what they are responsible for learning, older learners focus on its presentation; (3) there may not be a significant difference in individual requests per class; and (4) younger learners are more specific in their requests for input. (MSE)

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REQUESTS FOR SPECIFIC LANGUAGE INPUT: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OLDER AND YOUNGER ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Cheryl Brown
Brigham Young University
October 1983

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Anyone who has dealt with second language learners (or first language learners) has recognized that all input does not have the same impact on the learner. Some things in the input can be traced almost immediately and directly into the output. This has been shown, for example, in the studies of Carey (1981) who found that certain lexical items can be found in the output of a child after the child has heard them only once. Other things do not impact so easily or so directly. We have all experienced this phenomenon in our adult acquisition of vocabulary. We learn a new word and discover that it is everywhere. Rationally, we assume that the item has been there all along and that we, for some unknown reasons, have not previously felt its impact sufficiently to learn it. We, therefore, recognize that all input that is available to the learner does not have the same impact on him or her.

The input that is actually incorporated by the learner has been called "intake." According to Hatch (1979), Krashen has likened the entire process to the "casting of a net"

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into the sea of input. Anything the learner draws in becomes intake.

This fishing analogy, if extended, can help us understand the worth of studying specific requests for input. A specific request for input--that is, a question about some particular aspect of the language or communication--is tantamount not to the learner "casting a net" but to the learner letting down a carefully baited and lured hook with the hope of catching some particular thing. What the learner finds important to "catch" is of interest. This is especially true of requests for input made in the classroom because there we can assume that the learner at least recognizes that the purpose of the expedition is to "fish." The learners know they are "in the boat."

And so we come to the main question which this paper is designed to answer: what specific requests do language learners make for input? This is coupled to a second question: are there any differences between the specific requests that older (here defined as over 55 years of age) and younger (here defined as older than 18 and younger than 25) adult language learners make? This second question gives perspective to the first because there are such obvious differences in the success of these two groups. If it can be shown that there are differences between the specific requests for input that these two groups of learners make, it might be possible to surmise what some of the language

learning processes are contributing to the difference in success of the two groups.

The data derived for use in this study were taken from data gathered as part of a larger study of the distinguishing characteristics of the older adult language learner (Brown, 1983). Two groups of learners from the larger study supplied the data which were used in this study of specific requests for input. Group I consisted of 18 subjects (8 couples and one pair of women assigned as partners for the duration of the language study). The subjects were in an eight-week intensive Spanish program used for training missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The subjects ranged in age from 55 to 75 with the median age being 63.6. The subjects were chosen strictly by availability. They were <u>all</u> of the senior missionaries learning Spanish who started their language learning program at the Missionary Training Center (hereafter abbreviated MTC) in the three month period from October 1, 1981 to January 1, 1982. The subjects varied in several areas, such as previous experience with language, amount and recency of education, geographical origin previous to the mission, and area of assignment for the mission. They were all highly motivated as evidenced by the facts that their missions were completely voluntary, that they accepted the assignment to go wherever they were asked, and that they were willing to pay their own costs for the eighteen months of their mission experience.

Group II consisted of 18 young subjects (10F, 8M) who were chosen because they matched the Group I subjects in sex and, as nearly as possible, in previous experience with languages, including Spanish. All the other varying factors mentioned above were considered in the matching process. However, sex and previous language experience were the factors considered most crucial to this study so they were the prime matching factors. The subjects in Group II ranged in age from 19 to 23 with the median age for the group being 20.9. These subjects were chosen from among the many young missionaries learning Spanish who started their language program at the MTC between October 1, 1981 and January 1, 1982. Like the older subjects, these learners had volunteered for the service, had accepted assignments to go wherever they were asked, and were paying (or family or friends were paying for them) their own costs for the term of their mission experience.

The language program that both groups of subjects participated in was originally designed to be as similar as possible. The program uses an eclectic approach currently consisting of oral translation both from Spanish to English and from English to Spanish and of traditional kinds of grammar drills. Another aspect of the program, however, is aimed at communicative competence in the work the missionaries will be doing. This part of the program involves a great many roleplays and interactive kinds of activities. It also in-

volves committing to memory prepared dialogues that the missionaries use to teach once they are in the language area. Both groups also participate in a special speaking program. This program consists of each missionary using the target language for absolutely everything they possibly can. The course for both groups involves six hours of classes during the day and a somewhat less intense study and review period for two hours in the evening.

Although the entire language program was originally designed to be similar for both older and younger missionaries, the older missionaries have always had difficulty and do not generally reach the point in the program where they are learning the dialogues. They do participate in the roleplays and other activities, however.

The classes for the younger learners were generally composed of from eight to ten persons. The classes for the older learners were smaller, usually consisting of four learners or fewer. This was a result of the smaller number of older learners entering training at any one time and also of the fact that the older learners felt so much pressure when they studied in groups.

Two kinds of data were used to look at the specific requests for input that the learners made. The first kind consisted of requests which the learners made in language learning journals that they were asked to keep. The learners were given notebooks to use as language learning jour-

nals and were asked to write in them their thoughts and feelings about language learning. The specific instructions for the journal can be found in Appendix A.

The contents of the journals were analyzed extensively as part of the larger study. Two of the analyses done for that study are important to the issue of input. In the first, the journals were analyzed for the topics they encompassed. Since the general journal instructions had not been specific about what to write except that it should apply to language learning, it was assumed that any topic mentioned was part of what the learner perceived to be a factor in language learning. All the topics discussed were analyzed resulting in a list of seventy-six factors. (The detailed description of how the analysis was done and how the seventy-six factors were arrived at can be found in Brown, 1983.) The factor of most interest to this current study was the one entitled "Input".

Any time that the learners referred to any input they wanted, to the amount or type of input received, or to the complexity or meaningfulness of the input, it was counted as a mention of this factor. A score for each factor was then calculated for each learner based on the number of times per thousand words the learner mentioned the factor. The individual learner scores were used, then, to calculate a mean number of times per thousand words that each group mentioned the factor. This calculation produced a median of 0.48 men-

tions of input per thousand words for the older learners and 2.19 mentions of input per thousand words for the younger learners. In other words, the younger learners talked about input as part of the language learning process more than four times as much as the older learners. Although it is impossible to state the exact reason why such a difference should appear, it seems to be an indication of the relative importance that the two groups give to the factor.

In the second analysis made for the larger study but of consequence to this study, all of the seventy-six factors were ranked by the number of times per thousand words each group mentioned the factor. When this was done, the differences in ranking for the older and younger groups were examined to see what differences in focus could be found. This examination showed that "Input" was the third most different in ranking for the two groups. Only "Memory Aids," which the younger learners rank higher and "Assignments," which the older learners rank higher, are more different in the two rankings than "Input." See Table 1.

In the larger study this difference in focus on input and in realization of its role in language learning is part of a picture which became very clear when all analyses were considered together. The larger study shows the older learner to be "outward focused, depending on external factors to make the learning possible or easier" and the younger learner to be "more responsible for his or her own learning, a

TABLE 1

Factors/Abilities Differing by at Least 10 in the Ranking of Older and Younger Learners*

HIGHER ON THE RANKING OF THE OLDER LEARNERS		HIGHER ON THE RANKING OF THE YOUNGER LEARNERS	
Factor	Diff	Factor	Diff
assignments	30.5	memory aids	41.5
visuals	25.0	input	30.0
age	23.5	thinking in the L2	23.5
feedback	22.0	depth of processing	20.0
teacher attitudes	20.0	learning strategies	18.0
marriage	17.5	memory	18.0
teacher activities	17.0	monitor	16.5
activity--read/writing	16.0	interference	15.0
media	15.5	efforts and goals	14.5
activity--vocabulary	14.5	environment	14.0
variety	14.0	language variability	14.0
language play	14.0	speaking	13.5
activity--nonlinguistic	12.5	materials	12.0
teacher attitudes	12.5	self-concept	12.0
spiritual aspects	12.5	organization	11.5
activity--grammar	12.0	health	11.0
auditory discrimination	12.0	measurements/tests	11.0
anxiety	11.0	ped attitude:gen learn	10.5

*Taken from Brown, 1983.

learner who is internally figuring out how to handle the information coming in" (Brown, 1983:170). So, the larger study showed that overall, the younger learners were much more aware than the older learners that input was a part of language learning worth mentioning.

This finding was further substantiated when, for the purposes of the smaller study reported here, the journal data were re-analyzed to see more exactly what the learners were saying about input. First, the mentions of input were di-

vided into two categories: those dealing with the amount of input and those dealing with the kind of input.

There were definite quantitative differences in the learners' focus on the amount of input they were receiving. Older adults discussed the amount of input an average of 0.51 times per thousand words while younger adults discussed amount an average of 1.61 times per thousand words. This produced an observed *t* of 2.044 which is significant at the .05 level (critical t=2.040 for 31 df). Much more than the older learners, then, the younger learners seem to focus on the amount of input that they want to have or that they feel expected to take in. How this greater realization of the amount of input around them (the size of the sea in which they are fishing) affects the language learning process deserves further investigation.

There was no quantitative difference, however, in discussion of the kind of input coming in. A t-test run on the number of times per thousand words each group mentioned kind of input produced an observed *t* of 0.824 which is non-significant for 31 degrees of freedom. In other words, older learners and younger learners discuss the kind of input they are receiving about equal amounts in their language learning journals. These discussions usually center on materials and lesson content.

However, there are qualitative differences in the writing of the two groups about the kind of input they are receiv-

ing. Over 28.2% of the writing of the older group requested changes in the kind of input the learners were receiving. The kinds of changes requested ranged from simple desires to have more examples on a particular page in the textbook to having the teachers present the entire course content in a different order. Only 2.7% of the writing by the younger group requested changes.

The second kind of data used to examine the learners' requests for input came from participant observation which was also part of the larger study. The observations took place for a total of 44 hours in the classrooms and other activities and areas where the subjects were. Field notes for the observations were kept and later transcribed. Eleven of the observation sessions were also audio-recorded and transcribed.

Some adjustments had to be made in the field notes that could be used for some portions of this smaller study in order to have the amount of notes and the kinds of observations they detailed be as nearly equal as possible for any quantitative data reported. Therefore, only similar observations--those made at basically the same point in training, the same time of day, and the same field-note method (taped or not)--for the matched pairs of subjects were selected. This selection resulted in the use of data taken from nine pairs of matched subjects in 12.75 hours of observation as recorded in 179.25 pages of field notes.

All requests in the classroom were then extracted from the field notes. These requests came principally in the form of questions, but some statements were taken as requests if they had the illocutionary force of a directive to give information. These were statements such as "We don't understand when you're supposed to use SER."

In order to see if older learners differed from younger learners in the total number of requests made, a simple t-test was calculated. Each of the senior missionaries asked an average of 10.39 questions per hour while each of the younger missionaries asked an average of 2.81 questions. The observed *t* was calculated to be 2.64 which is significant at the .05 level for 16 degrees of freedom. It is close to significance at the .01 level. It appeared that the younger and older learners were indeed different in the number of questions they asked. However, this finding was suspect as the classes of the senior missionaries were generally smaller than the classes of the younger missionaries. Therefore, all of the questions asked by anyone during the class period in the matched classes were examined and a new t-test was performed. This revealed that there was an average of 20.52 questions asked per hour in the classes of each senior subject and an average of 16.63 asked in the classes of each younger subject. This figure produced an observed *t* of 0.602 which is not significant. It appears that class size may be a more important factor in the number of requests for input than is the age of the learner.

For another way of looking at the differences in the requests of the two groups, the requests extracted from the field notes were then categorized according to what they were a request for. The requests fell into seven categories.

GRAMMAR: used for any questions about grammatical structure (e.g., Do you need to add a "u" in dormir when you form the imperfect?)

VOCABULARY: used for any requests or questions about the meaning of a word expressed either as a question about what a Spanish word meant or about how to translate an English word into Spanish (e.g., What's "mess"?)

PRONUNCIATION: used for any requests or questions about how to say a word, how a particular spelling was pronounced (e.g., Convenío or convenio?)

REPETITION: used for several kinds of requests or questions including asking to have something repeated (e.g., What was the question again?), expressing lack of comprehension (e. g., I can't understand what you're saying there), asking for confirmation of something said--as if saying, "Is this right?" (e.g., This table?), and using rising intonation on a word or phrase when there are no other cues as to whether the student was checking grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or a mixture of any of them (e.g., Uhh, do we understand death?)

PROCEDURES: used when the students were asking for clarification of classroom procedure, exercise instructions, etc. (e.g., You want us to make a sentence with estar?) or when they were telling the teacher what kinds of things they wanted to do or to study

OTHER CONTENT: used for questions or requests not directly related to the language learning or missionary task (e.g. Where are you from?)

MISCELLANEOUS: used for all requests for how to say entire phrases when it is impossible to tell whether the request is for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, of any mixture of these three (e.g., How do you say, "I am dead"?) and also used for all requests which could not fit any of the categories above (e.g., How do you spell it?)

In order to minimize the effects of researcher subjectivity, the questions were categorized by two raters using the descriptions above as a guide. A third rater categorized all questions (approximately 15% of the total) on which the first two raters did not agree. If two of the three raters agreed on the categorization for a question, the request was placed in the category. This "consensus" categorization resulted in all of the questions except five being categorized. It was decided to place these five questions in the "Miscellaneous" category since it was used, as stated above, "for all requests which could not fit any of the other categories". The total counts for the matched individual older and younger learners on the various categories are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Kinds of Input Requested by Matched Individuals

	GRAM	VOCAB	PRON	REPET	PROCED	OTH CONT	MISC
OLDER	21.00	11.66*	1.00	47.33	11.00	0.00	2.50
YOUNGER	6.33	6.00	0.00	9.00	1.00	2.00	2.00

*Figures showing "partial" questions (e.g.=.66) are the result of calculations to equalize the data into terms of questions per hour.

After the data were counted, several categories were dropped. This was necessary if all the cells were to be of

an acceptable size for a chi-square to be performed. As a result, only the categories of "Grammar," "Vocabulary," "Repetition," and "Procedures" were used.

The observed chi-square for the kinds of requests made by the matched individuals was 3.956. This is non-significant suggesting that there is no difference between the kinds of requests that the older learners are making and those that the younger learners are making.

Once again, however, a visual scan of the data suggested that there might be a difference in the kinds of requests which were being made overall in the classes in which the matched learners were engaged. Therefore, all of the questions from those classes were categorized into the seven categories discussed above. That categorization yielded the results shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Kinds of Input Requested in Classes of Matched Individuals

	GRAM	VOCAB	PRON	REPET	PROCED	OTH CONT	MISC
OLDER	40.32	22.67	1.00	93.00	22.67	0.67	5.33
YOUNGER	20.33	30.00	2.70	64.33	13.33	7.00	14.00

Once again, "Pronunciation," and "Other Content," were eliminated because of low counts and the chi-square was performed using the remaining categories.

The observed-chi for the kinds of questions by the group was 13.973. This exceeds the alpha of 13.277 for chi at the .01 level and suggests that, even if individuals themselves are not making different requests for input, the input being requested in the environment is different for older and younger adult learners. As can be seen from Table 3, the major differences come in the categories of "Vocabulary," "Repetition," and "Miscellaneous." The younger adult learners ask disproportionately more about vocabulary than the older learners, and the older learners ask disproportionately more to have entire phrases repeated. Also, there were more of the requests of the younger learners which were not echo questions but which were not easily classifed as grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation.

What do these differences mean? For one thing, they show a greater interest on the part of the younger learners in vocabulary. Possibly this focus on words is what spells the difference in the success of the learners. This idea would require further exploration.

For another thing, it is clear that the younger learners can separate out particular vocabulary items that they wish to know. They make very specific requests for very specific items. With the older learners, it is different. They do not seem to be able to separate particular vocabulary items as much. As a consequence, they ask for global repetition. However, some caution should be taken with this interpreta-

tion. The older learners do separate out grammatical structures and ask about them separately about the same amount as the younger learners. This might be the result of a classroom focus on particular grammatical items but it might also be an evidence that the older learners can separate some items out of the whole, but they don't do as well in separating out vocabulary items.

Another alternative explanation of the phenomenon comes from the fact that the repetition category also includes all requests for input which were made in such a way that it was impossible to tell if the requester was inquiring about pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. In other words, the high number of requests by the older learners which fit in the repetition category might be an indication of their inability as input seekers to make it clear exactly what they want. This explanation also raises some questions, however, because of the disproportionate number of the requests of the younger learners which fell in the "Miscellaneous" category. These questions differ from the "Repetition" category only in that they are not repetitions of what has been said before, not direct expressions of lack of comprehension.

What does all this mean, then? Returning to the fishing analogy and interpreting the findings of this study, we have the following possibilities: (1) The older learners do not seem to focus on the imput in language learning as much as

the younger learners. The lack of focus in the journals on input in general suggests that the older learners might not realize while they are on the water that they are sitting on a sea full of possible "catches" or else they do not pay attention to the water because they expect someone else to cast the net or line for them and pull in precisely what they need. They may think they have done their part just by getting in the boat.

(2) While the younger learners are more concerned about the amount of fish in the waters that they are responsible to catch (as indicated by their focus in the the journals on the amount of input), the older learners are more concerned about changing the kind of fish available (as indicated by their focus on the need for changes in the kind of input).

(3) While the older learners seem to throw their hooks into the water more often individually than the younger learners (as indicated by the significant difference in the number of individual requests of individuals in the two groups), the total number of hooks going into the water per boat (as indicated by the number of requests per class which the individuals are members of) is not significantly different and it may be that all share in the overall catch of the boat. Whether this sharing of the catch actually goes on requires further research.

(4) The difference in the kinds of requests made within each group suggests several possibilities in the analogy.

The younger learners are putting down a lot more hooks designed for a specific fish (i.e., vocabulary). It may be that their fishing is more successful because they know what is the right fish, the fish with the "biggest poundage" to be added into the overall catch. This is a possibility that needs further investigation. Another possible explanation is that the older learners do not recognize that this "right fish" is in the water and so they are generally casting about for anything (with the requests for repetition). Or it may be that the older learners have recognized the "right fish" but they do not know how to choose the particular hook that will attract that fish.

There are probably many other possible explanations about what is making the difference between the fishing (learning) of the older learners and the younger learners. The research reported here should only serve to direct attention to possible areas of productive study if we ever hope to produce fishers whose nets, hooks, and lures will take from the sea of input the optimal catch.

Appendix A

JOURNAL INSTRUCTIONS

This journal has two purposes. The first is to help you with your language learning. As you write about what you think and feel as a language learner, you will understand yourself and your experience better.

The second purpose is to increase the overall knowledge about language learning so that learning can be increased. You will be asked to leave your language learning journal when you leave the MTC. However, your journal will not be read by teachers at the MTC. It will be read by researchers interested in language learning.

Your identity and the identity of others you may write about will be unknown (unless you wish it otherwise) to anyone except the researchers.

You will be given 15 minutes a day to write. Please write as if this were your personal journal about your language learning experience.

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